

A Night on the Flight Line, Part III  
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SrA Chamberpot and I egressed the aircraft to the sound of a honking horn. The Wizard-6 truck had finally arrived, but Mr. MysteryTour was no longer at the wheel. In his place was MSgt. Dapperdo, one of the most well-regarded NCOs in our Flight due to his calm demeanor, easy humor, and common sense solutions to problems. Dapperdo rolled down the window and kindly asked us to get our asses over there so we could get our damned lunches already. We both walked over to the truck as Dapperdo tossed the Box Nasties at us through the driver's door window.

Chamberpot took his lunch, walked around to the passenger side of the vehicle and hopped in the truck. Dapperdo, who rarely abided folks riding shotgun when he was at the helm, momentarily overcame his instinct to ask Chamberpot just who the hell he thought he was and instead asked me what was wrong. I gave him the broken radio, and explained how I had used it to prevent Chamberpot from seriously fucking everything up.

Dapperdo took the radio. "Well, at least it was for a good cause. Don't worry about it; I'll take care of it." He gave a wry laugh, and then kindly asked Chamberpot to get in the back of the van where he belonged. As he warily eyed Chamberpot to make sure he didn't just wander off, he looked over his shoulder to the back of the van and kindly asked SSgt Wizniewski to get his ass the hell off the truck and do something useful for once.

As Wiz shambled off the truck, Dapperdo turned back to me and said, "Wiz'll help you out with that flap write-up."

I thanked Dapperdo as Wiz rounded the front of the truck and confidently declared, "We're gonna have to cann a spoiler actuator."

This was news to me as I thought we had a flap problem, but Wiz sounded so damned confident in what he was saying that it must've been true. That was Wiz's game. The guy was the most confident and boisterous mechanic on the flight line, though no one could remember the last time he'd actually done anything of note. The thing was, the guy was so damned good at bullshitting that everyone simply believed everything he was saying and would forget that he usually had no clue what he was talking about. He was the Teflon sergeant--nothing stuck to him.

Now, when we were just hanging out, everyone gave him shit about being such a loser, but once he was out on the flight line and confidently declaring something to be thus-and-so, we fell under the enchanting power of his words and listened to him as if he were God dictating the Ten Commandments to Moses. I think he missed his true calling. He would've made a great politician. In all the years since, I've never met anyone else who could match his ability to not only make people forget what an awful mechanic he was, but also to simply take everything he said at face value.

Despite all that, MSgt Dapperdo's BS detector still registered a weak signal. "You don't think they have any in supply?"

"Nah, they never do. I've been here 14 years and never seen one issue out of supply." Wiz held his arms akimbo and thrust his chest out in an obvious display of manly confidence.

That was good enough for Dapperdo. "Alright, get everything ready out here, and then I'll come back and pick you up so you can go over and cann that part."

Wiz gave a curt nod and motioned for me to follow him. "Help me get this stand in place, and then you can go eat your lunch while I take care of the spoiler."

I shrugged my shoulders and set my lunch at the bottom of the crew entry door before running over to help Wiz reposition a B-2 stand underneath the left wing. Once in place, we jacked the stand up to the appropriate height, locked the wheels, and proceeded up the steps. I had never messed with this system in any depth, and I sure as hell hadn't changed out a spoiler actuator before, so I figured I'd follow Wiz up the stand and ask him how it all worked.

Wiz told me to take out the pressure switch, since there was a chance that it might be the problem. If it was, it was an easy fix and we'd save time cann'ing a spoiler actuator from another plane. It would also make him look better in the eyes of his superiors, who minutes before were expecting a lengthy delay and heavy maintenance, only to find that the clever and resourceful SSgt Wizniewski had quickly and cheaply solved the problem.

I started to unscrew the pressure switch from its housing and noticed some hydraulic fluid seeping out of the bottom. I paused for a second and heard systems running. I turned to Wiz and asked, "Shouldn't systems be turned off?"

He laughed at my meager systems knowledge. "No, no. Those are systems 2 & 3. This runs off system 4. It's all right. Go ahead and take it out."

Who was I to argue with the guy? He obviously knew what he was talking about. After all, I figured if the system were pressurized, hydraulic fluid would be misting like water out of a garden hose by now. I continued unscrewing the transmitter, momentarily forgetting that for systems 2 & 3 to be running, at least system 1 or 4 had to be running as well (and that was bad). The last thing I remember hearing at that moment was a hollow "Pop!" and feeling a dull pain in my shoulder. Then I was wet.

I quickly knelt down and searched the grated floor of the stand for the transmitter and found it by Wiz's left foot. Luck was with me for once as the transmitter hadn't fallen through the grating of the stand and 30 feet to the ground. It would've been a nightmare trying to find in the dark, while hydraulic fluid saturated the ground as it sprayed out of the wing at 3,000 psi. I picked-up the transmitter and managed to screw it back in half-blind, cutting off the torrent of hydraulic fluid.

I was completely soaked through with the oily red liquid. I yelled at Wiz to get me a rag since I didn't want to risk opening my eyes with the shit covering my face. I felt the stand bounce rapidly as he went down the ladder. I tasted hydraulic fluid in my mouth. It was sweet.

While he was gone, I took off my BDU blouse and threw it over the stand rail just to get it off me. I stood there alone on the maintenance stand, eyes closed and ears full of fluid, and wet in all sorts of uncomfortable places, wondering how in the hell I was going to explain all this. Most of the time, the only thought in your head when you fuck up is, "I hope nobody saw that." Considering my drenched state, it didn't really matter. I was soaked to the bone and there was no way it was going to dry before anyone of importance showed their face.

I felt Wiz climbing back up the stand and as he handed me the rag he said, "Dude, don't worry. I called Wizard-6 and he's on his way over right now so you can get out of here and take a shower."

I wiped the hydraulic fluid off my face and opened my eyes, seeing just how soaked I was for the first time. It didn't look good. My exposed skin glistened under the ramp lights and instead of their distinctive woodland camouflage, my BDU pants were jet black. I looked like I had just been dipped in motor oil. That's when the realization hit me, sending waves of panic through my gut. "How did you get a hold of Wizard-6?"

"Oh, I just ran next door and borrowed their radio for a minute. It's cool." Wiz crouched so he could see under the wing and all the way down the flight line. He pointed at a set of approaching headlights. "There he is. He's coming this way."

"What did you tell him?" I was afraid I already knew the answer, but I had to ask anyway.

"I told him you took a hydro shower and needed to get home so you could change and clean yourself up," he replied innocently enough.

The sumbitch had just condemned me to several weeks of unrelenting ball busting. I would not soon hear the end of this. Since the call had gone out over the air, everyone from the DCM to the lowliest airman had heard what happened to me. Resigned to my fate, I slowly made my way down the stand. My boots had absolutely no traction and I kept slipping with every step, but I managed to make it down the stand without breaking my neck. I quickly wished I had met some unfortunate fate when I saw the truck pull up.

Apparently, everyone who was inside doing nothing heard the radio call and had hopped inside the truck to come out and take a gander at me. I looked through the truck's side window and saw the wide grins and pointing fingers of the people inside. As I got closer, I could hear their laughter.

I finally made it to the driver's door and Dapperdo just sat there chuckling at me. He kindly asked me what the fuck I had been thinking.

I was about to reply when Wiz broke in, "Ah, it wasn't his fault. He took out the transmitter with systems on and got a hydraulic shower. He got it back in fast enough, though. Saved us a lot of work." He flashed me a toothy grin and a thumbs-up in an attempt to make me believe that he'd just stood up for me, though that was far from the truth. The hydraulic fluid must've acted as some sort of shield that was impenetrable to his bullshit, because I could see right through his charade.

Through a series of deliberately backhanded actions, Wiz had guaranteed that whenever someone remembered this event, it would only have my name attached to it. I'd just been witness to the secret of the Teflon sergeant: In addition to his bullshit field, he was adept at associating his fuck-ups with other people and essentially erasing his own involvement from their memories. In the aircraft maintenance world, it didn't matter whether you really fucked something up or not. All that mattered was whether your name was attached prominently enough in relation to an event that whenever people saw or heard it, they associated it with the fuck-up. A lot of guys had been wrongly branded because of their inability to distance themselves from incidents and make sure their names never got attached to them in any meaningful way. The next time they screwed up for real, they tended to receive a harsher punishment than what would normally be meted out.

I was lucky in this case. For one thing, I was just an airman so I was expected to fuck-up. Second, I had quickly remedied the problem and saved extra work, which was always a bonus in the maintenance world. Finally, Dapperdo seemed more amused than anything at the sight of an airman soaked to the bone in hydraulic fluid. It didn't help that as Wiz and I were explaining the sequence of events, some wise-ass decided to place elephant diapers (absorbent material) under my feet to catch all the hydraulic fluid that was dripping off of me.

Dapperdo kindly asked one of the rubberneckers in the back of the truck to put some fucking rags and diapers on the goddamned seat so I could get in the truck and sit down. As we drove off, the guys sitting in the back with me offered fifty different pieces of advice on how to deal with my uniform. Some said to throw it away, others said to wash it 10 or 15 times to see if that helped. My fellow dorm buddies nixed that particular idea, since they sure as hell didn't want to be the ones to wash their clothes after I had just put a hydraulic fluid-infused uniform into the washing machine.

Dapperdo was nice enough drop me off by my car. He kindly asked me to get the fuck off the truck and stay the hell at home. "You've had it bad enough for one night. See ya tomorrow."

I thanked him, said goodbye to the guys in the truck, then got into my car and drove off to my dorm. Half an hour later, I was lying in my bunk bed watching TV when my stomach started growling. It suddenly occurred to me that I'd left my damned lunch out by the crew entry door, uneaten. I silently cursed to myself when someone banged on my

door. I hopped off the top bunk and opened the door to see Wolf, my next-door neighbor, grinning at me. It was 2030, so he was already three sheets to the wind.

"Dude, I heard what happened, man!"

"What can you do?" I shrugged.

"You hungry, man? I got some pizza left over if you want some. I got some beer too. Wanna come over?"

I said sure and followed him over to his room. He opened his door and I was greeted by six cases of beer, two uneaten pizzas, and a couple of unfortunate-looking women.

The pizza was good, the beer was warm, and the women were ignored. It didn't turn out to be such a bad night after all.

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